

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN RICK BOUCHER

LENOWISCO Fiber Optic Backbone Lighting Event

Wise, Virginia

September 24, 2007

I am pleased to return to Wise County today to participate in a truly worthy celebration. Today, we celebrate the lighting of a significant portion of the government funded fiber optic backbone, which is being installed throughout much of our coal-producing region.

Approximately ten years ago, I encouraged local governments throughout the Ninth District to find a means of deploying broadband networks so that affordable high-speed Internet access would be available to businesses and residents throughout our region. My goal in making this recommendation was to set our region apart in comparison to other rural areas of the nation, to make us more attractive than the typical rural region to industries looking to expand their operations into new locations, and to create technology-based jobs for Southwest Virginians. Our region has made major strides since that time.

Two years ago, we celebrated the completion of construction of a major fiber optic backbone in the coal producing counties. That portion of the fiber optic network extends from Abingdon through Lebanon terminating in Claypool Hill and Richlands. Since that time additional fiber optic backbone has been constructed from Hansonville to Norton and from Jonesville to Rose Hill.

Just last month we celebrated the completion of the fiber optic backbone which travels from Claypool Hill along U. S. Route 19/460 through the Town of Tazewell and the Town of Bluefield. That backbone continues into Mercer County West Virginia and returns to Virginia along the I-77 corridor through Bland County and into Wythe County, where it connects along I-81 to fiber optic backbone owned by Bristol Virginia Utilities and to a fiber optic backbone owned by Citizens Cooperative. With the completion of that segment of the backbone, the network now provides a diverse loop of high capacity fiber for our coal-producing region, assuring continuous broadband service to the customers along the route.

Today, we mark the completion of the fiber optic backbone which travels through Wise County along U. S. Route 23 from Norton and Esserville to Pound and from U. S. Route 58 across Tacoma Mountain Road to Coeburn Mountain Road connecting both the campus of UVA's College at Wise and the Lonesome Pine Business and Technology Park. The fiber we are lighting today connects to a fiber optic backbone which BVU is constructing in Pound. In addition, the new wireless network in downtown Wise is receiving its Internet signal through this fiber optic backbone.

Additional high capacity fiber is currently under construction from Richlands to Grundy and from Pound to Clintwood. When construction is completed in late fall, the project will interconnect two existing fiber optic backbones, serving Lee and Wise Counties and Russell and Tazewell Counties, and will bring affordable broadband services to additional communities.

This total of 206 miles of fiber optic backbone has been funded by grants I secured through the U. S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration in the amount of

\$4.6 million and through grants provided by the the Virginia Tobacco Commission in the amount of \$5.2 million.

Once the current construction is completed, work can begin to deploy fiber optic backbone on the last segment along U. S. Route 83 from Vansant to Clintwood that will complete the major elements of the fiber optic backbone in the coal producing region. I recently announced an additional award of \$1.55 million from the U.S. Department of Commerce which I secured for the completion of this phase. I am hopeful that, as in previous phases, the Virginia Tobacco Commission will provide the matching funds for this next section of the backbone network.

The Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO fiber optic backbones, which have been deployed in the past several years with federal funding assistance, are two shining examples of the great strides which the communities in our region have taken in deploying broadband services, and today the availability in many of our localities of fiber optic backbone services is attracting substantial numbers of new jobs. It was the presence of the high speed backbone that enabled the more than 700 new technology based jobs that are arriving in Russell County with CGI-AMS and Northrop Grumman. Approximately 1,220 jobs have been created in the LENOWISCO Planning District since 2002, when the first section of fiber optic backbone was constructed. Over \$50 million of new private investment has occurred in the LENOWISCO region. And \$37 million in new annual payroll has been created. The extension of the network into the Tech Park will provide additional economic opportunities, and I look forward to future announcements for the location into the Park of additional technology-based businesses as a result of the network's construction.

Just as first canals, then railroads and then highways were the major arteries of commerce in earlier eras, in the 21st Century, access to broadband will be a defining feature of economic success for rural communities. Step by positive step, our expanding fiber optic infrastructure is assuring that Southwest Virginia's communities will be at the center of economic opportunity.

I would like to take the opportunity of these remarks to recognize several individuals who have been instrumental in securing the funding necessary for this excellent project.

Paul Buchanan, Chairman of the Coalfield Coalition, and other Members of the Coalition, deserve thanks for their leadership and foresight in bringing this opportunity to the region. I also want to commend the outstanding staffs of the LENOWISCO and Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commissions for the work they have done to plan the networks and assist with the funding applications for this large broadband development project. The foresight of our PDC's is much appreciated and is making a genuine difference in promoting economic growth in the region.

I want to recognize Paul Elswick, CEO of Sunset Digital Communications. Sunset is managing the construction of this portion of the backbone and is doing an excellent job moving the work forward in a timely fashion. I also want to recognize Wes Rosenbalm, President and CEO of Bristol Virginia Utilities, and Jim Kelley, Vice President of Operations for BVU Optinet, for their work on this project. BVU is managing the portion of the backbone in Dickenson, Buchanan, Russell and Tazewell Counties.

Neal Noyes, former Virginia State Director for the programs of the U. S. Economic Development Administration is to be commended for his able assistance in processing the application for the funds and for his continued efforts on behalf of the many communities of the Ninth District in his job as Executive Director of the Virginia Tobacco Commission.

I also want to thank Phillip Puckett, William Wampler, Joe Johnson, and Terry Kilgore who are members of the Virginia Tobacco Commission for the large matching grants which have

been provided for the project. The promise of a sizeable allocation of local funding provided a significant boost to the federal funding application.

Finally, I want to thank my Deputy Chief of Staff, Laura Lee, for her persistent and persuasive efforts in aid of this project. Laura's diligent work has been vital to securing the federal funds, and I thank her for this success.

The linking and expansion of the Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO fiber optic backbones marks another major step forward in our efforts to improve the quality of life for Southwest Virginia residents. I want to commend all here for the success of this project and offer special congratulations to the residents and business owners in Wise County who are now benefitting tremendously with the new access to broadband services.